Article draft. Published in *Style* Vol. 54, No. 1, 2020.

Algorithmic "We": Belonging in the Age of Digital Media

Matti Kangaskoski

University of Helsinki

To live, for a noetic soul, is to exist by sharing ends, that is *collectively* projecting dreams, desires, and wills – we *all*, as and with Florian, we all; insofar as we *are*, find ourselves thrown into and thrown *out* by the epoch of the absence of the epoch. (Stiegler 12)

Florian is a teenager of 15 who expresses the destitution of dreams in his generation: "We no longer have the dream of starting a family, of having children, or a trade, or ideals, as you yourselves did when you were teenagers. All that is over and done with, because we're sure that we will be the last generation, or one of the last, before the end" (9). In citing Florian's sentiment, Bernard Stiegler captures what he calls the "epoch of the absence of the epoch." By this, he means that our time, due to constant technological, economic, and social disruption, is in such a turmoil that it seems impossible for societies to build a foundation for a meaningful, shared life. This lack of foundation leads to the inability to project a future, the end of *dreams*, as in Florian's case. In my essay, Florian's sentiment serves as the backdrop for the question of contemporary means of forming collectives that would "exist by sharing ends." The main emphasis of the analysis falls on how to belong through the logic of inclusion and exclusion as illustrated by we-discourses and further complicated by profiling digital interfaces such as Facebook and other social media platforms. I examine how profiling interfaces afford creating collectives and what kinds of collectives are thus formed. Drawing on this analysis, I end by contemplating on why, despite their promise for lateral participation and emancipatory social space, these media platforms seem to fail in enabling, what I call here, *a shared foundation for becoming*.

[H1]BELONGING: LINGUISTIC AND ALGORITHMIC 'WE-INTERPELLATION'

As "we" addresses a group, it excludes its outside, the you, the she and he, the they, the others. In Louis Althusser's well-known example, a police officer addresses a citizen by shouting "Hey! You there!" by which gesture the citizen is "hailed" and becomes interpellated as a subject (2017). Similarly, the linguistic address of "we" *hails* the subject either in or out from the addressed group. In, say, the 2019 Ice Hockey World Championship final, "We Are the Champions" by Queen was played when the winning team celebrated their victory. The well-known chorus goes: "We are the champions / No time for losers / 'Cause we are the

champions of the world." In this context, the lyrics and the evocative song make for a strong we-interpellation through national identity and the social context of the game. One knows without a doubt whether one is included in the group of winners, the 'we', or not. Of course, this kind of group disintegrates almost as swiftly as it leaves the stadium, since the connecting element is momentary, and underlying differences are only temporarily brushed aside.

Group identity and group formation are complex issues involving several factors, but here, within the frame of the special issue, it suffices to point out that the re-iterating use of the we-pronoun is one important factor in forming groups and communicating group membership to others (see, e.g., Fontaine; Helmbrecht). Through a repeating we-interpellation—that both includes and excludes—one's own belonging as well as that of others' is interrogated and this knowledge is communicated within the group. In fictional we-narratives (*sensu* Bekhta) the we-reference defines the dominant mode of narration, capable of suggesting a stable identity for the social group, sharing collective action, emotions, and feelings (173). However, it must be emphasized that the we-reference constantly renegotiates its address; who belongs and who doesn't are revised again and again. In Bekhta's example of Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* "outsiders might occasionally join 'us,' [but] they still are only 'disguised as one of us,' which contributes to the sense of a closed group" (168). Additionally, irregularities such as madness, illness, sickness or death only happen to outsiders, and if they happen to one of "us," that person is instantly excluded from the we-reference (175-176). This sustains the homogenized self-identity of the group. Notably, despite the precarity of belonging, the group members know about each other and the we-interpellation is explicit, even foregrounded.

Let us complicate the issue by looking at we-interpellation in social media. When Donald Trump tweets "It is expected that China will be buying large amounts of our agricultural products!" (12 Sep 2019), the "our" refers to the nation of the United States. Here division is made between the United States and China, but the we-reference is to the full nation of the United States. More divisions appear when Donald Trump tweets:

> European Central Bank, acting quickly, Cuts Rates 10 Basis Points. They are trying, and succeeding, in depreciating the Euro against the VERY strong Dollar, hurting U.S. exports.... And the Fed sits, and sits, and sits. They get paid to borrow money, while we are paying interest! (12 Sep 2019)

Here the division begins similarly to the first tweet—between the United States and European Central Bank (ECB)—but the last two sentences shift the division inside the nation and further divides the previously formed group. The "they" is not the ECB anymore, but the "Fed" who get paid while "we," now probably everyone else in the U.S., pay interest. They borrow, we pay. In the first tweet, two nation groups are pitted against each other; in the second, a division is made within one nation group. Fluent language users read the implications intuitively, but pay little attention to how the division is made. While this is a typical function of we-reference, it is complicated in this case by the operation of an *algorithmic we-interpellation* effectuated by the interface and mostly hidden from view.

It is by now common practice that the content on digital interfaces is tailored to each user individually. In the words of Google's former CEO Eric Schmidt: "We know roughly who you are, roughly what you care about, roughly who your friends are [in other words we know your 'school of fish']. [T]he technology will be so good it will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them." (Qtd in Rouvroy and Berns, XII) Indeed, as evidenced by the necessary consent to cookie policy upon entering almost any website in the EU, most digital interfaces collect data for profiling.[1] Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are paradigmatic examples of these kinds of interfaces. Profiling influences the interface users encounter as well as the implicit group they are set in. However, we—as users—do not know precisely what information is used to construct our profiles and what criteria the profiles and subsequent tailoring of the interface are based on. Moreover, due to its immanent normativity, the interface actively presents itself as the most relevant, neutral, and even objective, making it easy to neglect everything that falls outside of its scope.[2] The result is that (1) the interface logic, and its medium—*that there is* a medium—fades from sight; (2) the boundaries of the addressed group and its beliefs, norms, and values seem more expansive than they are; and (3) the cohesion of the group appears to be higher than it, in reality, is. This creates the already familiar "filter bubbles" (Pariser), and their capacity to polarize opinions between "bubbles" is well discussed. Let us draw

[1] See also Rouvroy and Berns; Zuboff.

[2] Immanent normativity means that the norms that the interfaces import are not explicit or deliberated upon as would be the case with, for example, legislation. Instead they arise from statistical uses of data which has the appearance of tracking social reality as it is, objectively. As a result, the norms they import seem to "arise spontaneously, one could say, from life itself, from the world itself, independently of any qualification, evaluation or deliberation." (Rouvroy and Berns V). See also Kangaskoski.

out the significance of this we-interpellation in terms of group address before moving on to the question of forming collectives on these interfaces.

The linguistic "we" interpellates the addressee(s) into or outside a certain group. The inclusion and exclusion logic creates divisions between "us" and "them" fluidly, but still noticeably. In profiling digital interfaces an analogous interpellation takes place: a profiled group is created and addressed through an algorithmic logic, pre-excluding everything and everyone that falls outside the profile. It effectuates a structural, algorithmic we-address, where the act of exclusion is hidden and the boundaries of the address are unknown. So, whereas in the linguistic we-address—in particular, in the we-narrative—the exclusion is often *foregrounded* for certain effect, on profiling digital interfaces the exclusion happens in the *background*, unbeknownst to the user. In a social medium such as Twitter, the addressed group—those who see the tweets—already share a profile within which the limits of the linguistically addressed collectives have already been drawn, and the shared—or opposing—values of the group can be effortlessly evoked, like in the "They get paid to borrow money, while we are paying interest!" dispatch. The addressees have already been interpellated algorithmically before the explicit we-address is made. Since the algorithmic interpellation is entirely tacit, they do not know who belongs to the addressed group, what they share, and in particular, what they do not share or agree on. Let us, then, dig deeper and look at an example of a collective formed through such an interpellation.

IMAGINING COLLECTIVES: LINGUISTIC-ALGORITHMIC WE-ADDRESS IN THE "SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION"

I take the Facebook page "We are All Khaled Said," a significant factor behind the January 25 Revolution in Egypt in 2011, as my small case study for several reasons. The first is simply that it exemplifies a combination of the linguistic and the algorithmic "we"-interpellation. Second, even more so than the advent of the internet, social media were imagined as a democratizing vehicle. It held, and still holds, the promise of bringing people together, of ease of communication, of facilitating lateral means of participation and action; and the promise of a decentralized network instead of the old top-down dictation. Social media played a role in the revolution, but what kind of group did it create? Moreover, the group scattered soon after the revolution, and according to Linda Herrera the page "failed as an anti-ideology machine" (2014, 129). I argue that this failure is suggestive

of a broader shortcoming of contemporary digital cultural interfaces in creating groups that could enable, what I am interested in in this essay, a shared foundation for becoming.

The "We Are All Khaled Said" page was created soon after a man named Khaled Said was brutalized by the police in broad daylight, in front of witnesses, and died. Circulated pictures of Said's disfigured face from the morgue inflamed the already enraged and frustrated Egyptian people to demand change. Over a period of roughly six months, a collective force was gathered, first, to revolt against the Emergency Law that enabled police brutality in Egypt, and then, later, as things escalated and the page gained momentum, to overthrow the government.

In her book *Revolution in the Age of Social Media* (2014), Linda Herrera analyzes the coming into being of this collective. The first contributing factor was the skillful mobilization of people through a well-timed message. In this, the we-reference and its affordance of making divisions was crucial. The use of "we" and "them" set up the scenario of "good ('we') versus evil" (58). Additionally, the message of the page was sharp and forceful, and was able to hijack people's emotions in a way that similar appeals before had not. One of the first posts of the page read:

> We are not a party, we are not a movement, and we are not a group… we are any optimistic Egyptian, guy or girl, who got together to demand our rights and the implementation of law. We don't want anyone to use our cause for their political gains… we have to remain one voice… a voice that no Egyptian would disagree with… a voice that demands the rights granted to us by our constitution and Egyptian law. (qtd. in Herrera 68)

While the message needs to be sharp, it, perhaps paradoxically, also benefits from generality. After all, a voice that no one "would disagree with" cannot be very specific. As Herrera explains, the two administrators of the page tried to fend off any direct political alliances to keep the message as unifying as possible, and, strategically speaking, to amass as many followers as possible (66–69). In the previously quoted post, the reiterated we-address is gradually extended until "we" are anyone and everyone who demand their rights.

Arguably, the networked youth were ready to be mobilized, but the skillful linguistic we-address and the important message alone cannot account for the page's success in terms of numbers. In six months, it gathered 1.3 billion views (55). This was due to social media affordances, the algorithmic we-interpellation, and the

professional employment of these affordances. For example, the inaugural post was timed to a moment when most people typically went online, and during subsequent hours and days, the administrators constantly urged people to share the page to accomplish specific goals (to become X in numbers in X amount of time). They used various tactics to engage people to care about the success of the group, and so on. In other words, the administrators – people with professional marketing skills and experience of online campaigns – knew how to make the algorithms work for the maximum visibility of the page: the more views and followers in a short time, the better visible the page would become, and combined with its purpose, the stronger the interpellation of the we-address. The user is continuously interpellated by the same message which increases the importance of that message, importing urgency and relevance. At the same time, the mechanism of the interpellation fades to the background. In addition, the social media interface encourages what I call *quick affective engagement*: the main mode of participation is the instant expression of various emotional states through icon selection, sharing and commenting, often bypassing the much slower conscious deliberation.[3] The question then becomes: What *kind* of group is thus created? Zizi Papacharissi offers that affective attachments through media may produce "feelings of community," but not actual communities (Papacharissi 9; quoting Dean 22). But, of course, these affective attachments may drive a movement that aims at community (ibid.). A collective thus formed—is it a collection of individuals, a group that speaks as one, or perhaps a collective with a future projection, that is, shared dreams, desires, and wills (see Stiegler above)?

COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUALS OR BECOMING AS A COLLECTIVE?

Before answering the above question, we must look at the issue from a broader perspective. On a basic level, the algorithmically connected group, based on tracking, profiling, and anticipating user behavior, probes the possibility of a nonindividualized form, focusing on relations of de-subjectified data. In their article on "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation" Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns write:

> On the surface of it, this productive tele-objectivity at play in datamining and algorithmic profiling practices seems to leave the realm of the subject and therefore potentially to allow for what Simondon calls a transindividual individuation

[3] An additional but not insignificant feature is that these quick affective reactions can be instantly expressed by a single touch or a click. This is done by hands, and hands have been shown to be quicker than the conscious mind (see Kangaskoski).

process—which amounts to neither I nor we, but designates a process of co-individuation of the "I" and "we" producing social reality, that is, associated environments in which meanings form. (XX–XXI)[4]

The key term here—and also significant for Stiegler's idea of "epoch" as the shared foundation for meanings to form—is *individuation*. For Rouvroy and Berns, the process of co-individuation of the "I" and "we" enables producing social reality; in Stiegler, it enables the epoch. Both instances adopt the term from Georges Simondon's philosophy on how individuals and collectives come to be. Put most simply, individuation means the process of integration of disparities or differences into a coordinated system (Rouvroy and Berns, V). The related term is *becoming*, which is characterized helpfully by Scott as "being through a problematic, divided, reunited, carried in this problematic, which sets itself up through it and causes it to become" (2014, 6). Therefore, individuation is a process of integration of disparaties in a system, and this integration—through a metastable equilibrium—enables further integrations, the opening of the system for something new. Notably, by emphasizing process, individuation does away with the idea of pre-existing individuals and allows for imagining a collective that would produce social reality *as* a collective. It shifts the emphasis from being to becoming, and from substance to process (Scott 5). Moreover, individuation is integration of disparities in the sense of becoming something new in the process, not in the sense of erasing them. What this means is that a collective is not born when people come together; instead, the collective is born through a process of being through a problematic that allows further integration, not just within itself but also in relation to its environment. Thought about this way, *belonging* does not mean inclusion into a collected set, but being part of the process of collective becoming. The key issue here is whether this kind of co-individuation is possible in the collectives formed through algorithmic profiling and in the environment where it takes place.

The page "We Are all Khaled Said" did create momentum to drive the revolution, but soon after "lost its compass" and gradually withered away (Herrera 133). After the revolution, another authoritarian instance stepped into the vacuum.[5] The reasons for this were, on the one hand, case-specific: the use of the "meme of martyrdom" which, by making Said a saint, put him beyond worldly problems and contradictions. This

[4] "Productive tele-objectivity" refers to both the ideology of objectivity in the statistic use of data and its use for making anticipations on user behavior.

[5] Alain Badiou comments on the failure seven years after the Egyptian revolution: "[I]f the movement cannot create some new form of organization at the level of the state power, the result is that something which is an organization like the Muslim Brotherhood, finally takes the power. And after that we have the return to the old situation." (n.p.)

disabled the discussion about who Khaled Said was and related moral issues. On the other hand, the reasons were connected to the social media platform itself and the marketing strategies employed by the administrators (129). Social media interfaces do not afford the kind of introspection that integration of differences would require; their pace is fast, their tone is often blunt, and the amount of differing opinions and misinformation runs high. They offer a *place* for conversation where there is *no time nor space* for the very conversation it enables. To exacerbate this issue, in their attempt to be as inclusive as possible, the administrators actively tried to prevent and control controversial topics and contradicting opinions, sometimes with expulsion from the group (66). According to Herrera, the "We Are All Khaled Said" page had its moment of introspection when the group began discussing the moral issues around recent self-immolation cases in Egypt caused by the example of the Tunisian revolution. However, discussion time was cut short because the planned demonstration—which was to become a revolution—was only a few days away (133).[6] The problem of marketing strategies is that they thrive on feelings of community but do not necessarily help to create actual communities. Ambiguity and the temporary erasure of differences achieve maximum advertising impact, but exclude complexity, crisis, and contemplation—all necessary in integrating disparities. We can therefore speculate that the very attempt to create as inclusive a we-reference as possible became a disintegrating element. Moreover, when the reference is vague, anyone can step into its place and force its extent and content into his/her own direction.

In broader terms, the algorithmic interpellation does not create a collective since the collection of profiled individuals has no possibility of co-individuation; its form offers no real means for the collective to become something as a collective. Instead, it creates a group of "fragments, partial and impersonal reflections of daily existences that datamining makes it possible to correlate at a supra-individual level, but that indicate nothing greater than the individual, so no people" (Rouvroy and Berns XXVII). The profiled user is a part of a profiled group, but is never referred to as anything more than an individual user. The "You" to whom the interface promises to deliver the most relevant content by tracking is always singular (Kangaskoski). Furthermore, the group profile connects individuals through some of their real or assumed traits but excludes others and thereby

[6] I wish to emphasize that the aim here is not to critique the achievements of the page or the revolution. My critique concerns the affordances of the media platforms used and the broader implications of their usage.

excludes contradiction. Here we find the ultimate inclusion/exclusion effect: *parts of the individuals themselves* are excluded and only the included parts are used to form the group. Therefore, the logic of inclusion/exclusion prevents individuation by automatically excluding the irregular features of the individual and of the group. Thus, in contrast to becoming as a collective, the interface's tendency is to homogenize by automatically pre-excluding what is not already a part of it (Kangaskoski).

BELONGING AND BECOMING

The beauty of automatic exclusion is that it happens by weeding out the "irrelevant" material from visibility before it ever arrives on the interface. As I argue previously, this gesture of exclusion fades from sight, and what is left is displayed as all that matters. This brings us back to the possibility of the we-narrative as a literary form, if not to imagine collectives with positive outcomes—and often the fictional we-communities are portrayed as controlling or prying, then to foreground the mechanism of creating collectives in discourse. Whereas the operation of inclusion and exclusion is only somewhat tacit in the linguistic and literary "we," on digital profiling interfaces the mechanism recedes almost completely from sight, thus creating an unknowable and undelineated group of addressees that can be oblivious to the fact that there is an excluded outside, the they, the you, the other. Moreover, this excluded outside is also inside the group, since even this "we" is, in reality, more fragmented and contradictory than it appears on the interface.

In both cases, the reader is interpellated into an imaginary collective. The difference is that the literary we-narrative can actually bring forth the gesture of interpellation—it foregrounds its own mechanism—which enables a critical relationship toward it. This gesture is hidden in profiling digital interfaces.

To live by sharing ends, to collectively project dreams, desires, and wills, would require a shared foundation where belonging means, not inclusion into a collected set, but being part of a shared process. In my interpretation, Florian despairs over not belonging because the very foundation for this process is lacking—there is nothing to belong to, except perhaps for the fleeting exclusion from and inclusion in pre-determined profiles. Florian's "we" is his generation, a group connected by the absence of the epoch—as the necessary foundation, a metastability which would enable opening onto something new, the idea of a future—and this is the end of dreams. The foundation is impossible without the time and space to deliberate, integrate, divide,

unite, and to set itself out for further becoming. However, to end on a positive note, the study of discourse, as I am sure this special issue testifies, can be a vehicle for the understanding of how forms, be it we-narratives or digital profiling interfaces, format our imagination and dreams. This understanding and its collective sharing can be a part of forming a foundation for an epoch of belonging.

[BIO]Matti Kangaskoski is a scholar and a poet. Kangaskoski's academic work concerns the cultural logic of digital interfaces and their influence on thought and values, with a specific focus on literary production. He has published extensively on the strategies of reading and interpreting contemporary print and digital poetry. He is the author of three volumes of poetry and a novel. Currently Kangaskoski is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Arts in Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. (matti.kangaskoski@helsinki.fi)

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